THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: CONSTRUCTING SEXUAL IDENTITY

By

Kimberly Ann Foore

RECOMMENDED: Christine E Cooper

Pamela McCreetor

Jim Brown
Advisory Committee Chair

Jim Brown
Chair, Department of Communication

APPROVED: Susan Blalock
Dean, College of Liberal Arts

Susan M. Kennedy
Dean of the Graduate School

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Date

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Kimberly Ann Foore, B.A.

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Abstract

The present research explored how contemporary women define their sexual identity and communicate their needs/wants for sexual gratification during the act of sexual intimacy. Using human science epistemology, methodology, and methods, eight women's narratives were co-constructed into two emergent themes: Defining sexuality as self-stereotyping identity and Setting the stage for uncertainty as mask. This research explored the unique definitions of sexuality from the co-researchers perspective and ultimately determined that sexual identity is inextricably bound to self-presentation and impression management. It was also discovered that these women communicate their sexual needs nonverbally and "hide" behind a mask of uncertainty out of a culturally developed fear of being judged and/or labeled negatively for being too sexually experienced.

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Introduction

This research is an attempt to clarify the reality of women's self-perception of their identities within sexual relationships, the purpose of which is to explore and understand the ways in which women construct, interpret, and manage their self-identity within sexual relationships and how/if they communicate what they need during the act of sexual intercourse for satisfaction. The framework for this study will impose human science epistemology, methodology, and method to provide a unique understanding of the co-researchers' lived experience and the selves they perceive that they present to their sexual partners. The definitions of sexuality that are unique to my co-researchers and the way they believe that they manage their sexual self-presentation to themselves, the public, and their partners is explored.

If women are in fact sexual beings why are we not communicating about sex, specifically about our individual wants and needs, earlier in our relationships? The suggestion that we are not is evident in headlines in almost every national women's magazine on the newsstand consistently suggesting that lack of communication is the number one problem of women's sexual dissatisfaction (e.g., Glamour, February 2004; Cosmopolitan, March 2004). These questions are where I began my quest to learn, from women's experiences, why they (we) are not stating what they want sexually. Is this apparent lack of communication a comfort issue, an identity issue, a relational problem, or none of

the above? Perhaps women are, in fact, verbally communicating in bed yet refusing such admissions out of fear that doing so will be interpreted by others in a stereotypical and/or negative way, reflecting cultural expectations about women and sexual experience/expression. The double bind that women face in everyday life in this culture regarding sexual experience and satisfaction is sometimes overwhelming and more so in the personal parameters of intimate sexual relationships.

The definitions of sexuality provided by scholars include behaviors, motivations, desires, communication, and skills. The majority of scholarly research on sexuality takes on a very instrumental meaning of sexuality while tangentially addressing communication strategies and ideologies. Even the language for referring to sex is impersonal and scientific, e.g., intercourse, coitus, and copulation. Not only are the words used to describe the act usually scientific they can also be moralistic as in fornication; euphemistic as in doing it, sleeping with; or culturally unacceptable as in fucking, screwing, or banging.

Sexuality, from my perspective, must include pleasure, identity, freedom, and relational control. Researchers define sexuality as, "the most intense way we relate to another person" (Nozick, 1999, ¶ 1) and "sexual behaviors, arousal, and responses, as well as attitudes, desires, and communication" (Harvey & Weber, 2002, p. 58). These are just two of the many and varied definitions that scholars have placed on the ambiguity experienced in attempting to formulate an exact

definition of this act. For the purposes of this research, I choose to define sexuality as intense, communicative, physical, and emotional acts shaped by culture and lived experience, and constructed through each individual's own interactive experience. By providing this operationalization I am explicitly stating that I will not follow an academically imposed definition, but rather, I will refer to my co-researchers' narratives of experience for defining sexuality as their experiences shape and create this phenomenon.

Most research places an emphasis on the importance and/or absence of safe sex communication in order to minimize the risk of AIDS, STD's, and the danger involved that may undermine a truly pleasurable sexual experience. Singer (1996) makes an excellent point when she declares that, "most contemporary sexual discourse is not very sexy, because it operates within a logic and language of sexual epidemic" (p. 263). American culture is inundated with safe-sex warnings. As Adelman (1992) theorizes, "the subjective experience of sexual excitement is sustained by a sense of risk or danger" (p. 74) so why ruin "the moment." Communication scholars often include risk management as a focus of study in the health communication discipline. Undoubtedly, sexual understanding and protection is an important area of research in our culture and others in this time of disease and risky behavior. Thus, this study is no way intended to discount this very real social problem. Rather, the aim is to broaden understanding of contemporary women's communication regarding all aspects of

sexual relationships, but specifically focusing on their communicative expression of individual needs for sexual gratification.

Partners' lived experience of sexuality within relationships has been overshadowed and somewhat ignored by Communication scholars as a valid area of study. We seem socially preoccupied with sexual health risk and therefore undermine the value of studying real lived experience as an opportunity to help women achieve what they need/want sexually. Harvey and Weber (2002) discuss this lack of participant reality in their book *Odyssey of the Heart: Close Relationships in the 21st Century*, claiming, "...it is unfortunate and ironical that there has been little exchange and cooperation between researchers studying sexuality and those studying sexuality within relationships" (p. 58). They further explain that the research emphasis aligning sex and risk management has historically either taken on a self-report strategy or only dealt with one partner's perception of sexuality within the relationship (p. 58).

The present research does not try to undermine the reality of the world we live in and the risks associated with sexual relations; however, I am curious as to why there remains a lack of discourse opportunity available to contemporary women to openly and honestly discuss sexuality with their partners. Villanueva (1997) states that, "in order to shift the discourse of sexuality from one of problems to one of desire, an understanding of the way people perceive, define, and experience their sexuality is needed" (p. 3).

Women, specifically North American women, perform roles daily that range from daughter to student to caretaker to sexual being, as well as a host of others. We are urged by overwhelming, social expectation to "do it all" and do it well. The image-conscious media constantly reminds us that we have to be many different people all wrapped up in one pretty package. Perhaps this complexity of role expectations influences women's sexuality and as a result, a lack of common relational discourse opportunity is available to discuss our sexual instincts.

Cline (2002) explores the various social factors that differentiate meanings of sexuality including race, class, context, and what she deems the most important, gender (p. 2). Wood (2002) also explores gender as a social construct, and how it shapes communication within our relationships. Societal views of masculine and feminine facilitate concepts of what is or is not appropriate for women when communicating about sexuality and emotions. According to Jackson (1996), "it is in the process of converting external labels into internal capacities for naming that activities become more precisely defined and linked to a structure of socio-cultural expectations and needs that define the sexual," (p. 68). Sexuality as a social construct predicts that sexual "norms" are inherently culturally learned behaviors that stem from the social gender roles of masculine or feminine. Jackson goes on to say that, "feminine and masculine sexual roles are popularly believed to fit together and be complementary, but in reality the relation between them is more often one of disjunction," (p. 72), and, I would add,

dysfunction.

Theoretical Framework

Two closely related concepts that help explain why people present themselves in certain ways are self-presentation and impression management. Erving Goffman's (1959) work establishes both self-presentation and impression management in human interaction. Using a dramaturgical metaphor, Goffman compares people in mundane reality to stage actors in how they construct performances in order to make distinctive impressions on their perceived audiences, and to establish certain meanings of themselves and the shared social context. Drama is an influential metaphor in understanding the creation of a self to be perceived by others. Goffman uses the term *performance*, which refers to "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his [sic] continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (p. 22). The performance structure incorporates "setting," or locus of social interaction, and the "personal front" (p. 24) that refers to "items of expressive equipment, the items that we most intimately identify with the performer himself [sic] and that we naturally expect will follow the performer wherever he [sic] goes" (p. 24). Such "equipment" is comprised of clothing, gender, age, and many other nonverbal cues of a social self, and is the metaphorical basis for Goffman's work on self-presentation. Self-presentation provides a highly useful framework for the study of identity and sexuality in the

contemporary experience of women and coheres usefully as a communicative perspective.

Feingold (1992), who provides a meta-analytic review of seventy-eight previous research studies of perceived attractiveness, concludes that, "physically attractive people are perceived as more sociable, dominant, sexually warm, mentally healthy, intelligent, socially skilled, and popular than less physically attractive people" (as cited in Andersen, 1999, p. 266). How we present ourselves to our audience, or observers (including relational partners), is crucial to their formation of assumptions, perceptions, and estimates of credibility. Women, specifically, are inundated with media images and reports of how sexual we should or should not be. If perceptions are being fostered of us, I question the experiences women have "playing the part" or performing the role of sexual human being while simultaneously trying to incorporate other roles we choose or find necessary.

Harvey and Barnes (1994) suggest, "The process of impression management involves the selection of certain appearances, behaviors, and messages intended to convey a desired image based on role and situational determinants" (p. 701). Theories of self-presentation and impression management are very much interlinked and interdependent on one another since self-presentation projects a certain impression on others (Littlejohn, 2002, p. 151). Every day is a process of constructing an identity to present to the world; how we

manage this identity and create our reality is fundamental to the research of nonverbal communication.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach to appearance and perception, impression management, and the social constructions of identity are the structural foundations of this research. Thus, social construction of identity, that is to say, how we create, maintain, and transform identity through communication in relationships, grounds this research (Gergen, 1994a). Social constructionism, as Gergen (1994a) describes, "is principally concerned with elucidating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world in which they live" (p. 266). Thus, this research seeks an understanding of women's sexuality as they experience it and a definition of sexuality, as they are best able to describe in regard to their own communicative action within relationships.

Chapter One

Literature Review

This literature review focuses on the evolving definitions of sexuality throughout history and the cultural implications that have added to and changed those definitions. Although few previous studies have specifically explored features of how women communicate what they want sexually, and how that helps to define their identities, several areas contribute and relate to this research. By evaluating the previous work on the social construction of sexuality and identity a foundation will be laid to further explore the communicative practices of women. An understanding of the nature of women's sexuality, identity, and communication is needed to better value and appreciate women's actual, lived experience.

Evolving Definition of Sexuality

One important contributor to the definition of sexuality is Alfred Kinsey (1948) who, in his own words declared,

> It is obvious that the failure to learn more about human sexual activity is the outcome of an influence, which the custom and the law have had upon scientists as individuals, and of the not immaterial restrictions, which have been imposed upon scientific investigations in this field (p. 3).

Kinsey's research on sexuality is the most quoted and referenced in the academic literature of human sexuality. However, authors since have expanded his

definition of sexuality based on changing cultural attitudes and currency regarding sexuality. A historical look at evolving definitions is useful to understand the current cultural perspective of sexuality in the United States.

According to Bullough (1998) "the modern study of sexuality began in the nineteenth century, and these early studies were dominated by physicians" (p. 131). It was an early assumption that because physicians were experts on bodily function they were also experts on sexual behavior. Many physicians such as Havelock Ellis became prominent figures in speaking about sexual knowledge and openly admitted to pursuing a medical degree solely for the purpose of teaching and learning about sexuality (Bullough, p. 131). Ellis's book, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex (1936)* is important because it emphasized sexuality as a normal, rather than deviant, phenomenon. Many physicians gathered their data on sexuality from their own patients, but were always influenced by the morality and religion of the culture at the time.

It was not until 1940, when Kinsey, who held a Ph.D. in Biology and was a leading expert on gall wasps, began to focus his academic pursuits on family, marriage, and sex. Until this time, the topic of sexuality was considered only relevant to hygiene, disease, and morality. Kinsey challenged this mode of thought and as Bullough (1998) posits, "Kinsey's major accomplishment was to challenge most of the assumptions about sexual activity in the United States" (p. 131). Kinsey's exploratory work produced two widely read and well-regarded

texts, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (1948)* and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female (1953)*. Both of these books included descriptions of sexual behaviors, actions, and explicit sexual practices that had never been publicly addressed or discussed, such as extensive research on masturbation, bestiality contacts, and homosexuality.

Kinsey was not alone in his search for an understanding of sexuality, especially in women. *The Sexual Factor in Marriage (1930, 1966)* by gynecologist Helena Wright began to instruct women about their own sexuality and to challenge the "frigidity" label so often ascribed to women by male researchers who seem generally to have viewed sexuality as immoral. Wright offered very explicit instructional guidance on masturbation and let women know they can be in charge of their own orgasm and sexuality. Following Wright, Shere Hite (1976) published a nationwide study of female sexuality in *The Hite Report*. Her study involved three thousand women ages 14-78 and describes, in their own words, their experiences and feelings about sex. Hite declares that, "although all of our social institutions are still totally based on hierarchical and patriarchical forms, patriarchy as a form is really dead, as is the sexuality that defined it" (p. 387). The women who pioneered sexuality research were still using mostly quantitative research and were taking a biological approach to sex and sexuality, which was and remains a sign of the times in research.

It is important for us, as communication researchers, to define sexuality in

order to better study its effects on and importance to the individual, as well as on relationships. "The range of meanings associated with sexuality varies from the physical to the relational, the economic to the moral" (Cline, 2002, p. 3), and the term "sexuality" conjures an array of images, fantasies, and ideals. While never assuming a solid, social definition, it is, by and large, a matter individually defined by personal parameters. Not only is the concept of sexuality complex, it is seemingly all-encompassing. Sexuality within intimate relationships is often very difficult to communicate effectively in that it incorporates highly personal expectations. It has for centuries been the source of major complaints by both women and men as a central problem in their relationships.

Noonan (1998) describes sexuality as, "one of the most complex aspects of human life" (p. 150). Schwartz & Rutter (1998) define sexuality as encompassing both sexual behavior and sexual desire (p. 3). Sexual behaviors are the sexual acts we engage in and sexual desire is assumed to be the motivation to engage in those sexual acts. The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS, 2001) broaden the definition of sexuality even further:

> Human sexuality encompasses the sexual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors of individuals. Its dimensions include the anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry of the sexual response system; identity, orientation, roles, and personality; and thoughts, feelings, and

> relationships. The expression of sexuality is influenced by ethical, spiritual, cultural, and moral concerns. (2001, ¶ 1)

The SIECUS considers the study of sexuality a science they label "sexology" and the cultural understanding of sexuality is deemed "sexosophy" (¶ 1). Founded in 1964 by a group of concerned citizens, SIECUS advocates the right of individuals to make responsible sexual choices. This definition provides further confusion as to what sexuality is or could be. Current literature on sexuality and communication encompasses all the previously regarded pioneers of sexuality research and expands the definition at great length. Barbara Allen (2004) defines sexuality as, "the social expression of social relations to and social reference to bodily desire or desires, real or imagined, by or for others or for oneself, together with the related bodily states and experiences" (p. 118).

Contemporary sexuality definitions are extensive, confusing, and different from those of other generations because they take into account a much more general range of experience and individuality in defining sexual experience. Is sexuality an emotion, a state, a description, or an encompassing origin of self as suggested by other scholars? Not only is attempting to define sexuality difficult, how women use their sexuality is even less studied and more blurred. Humanities and History professor Robert Nye observes,

> Sexuality has always been an obsessive human concern; it has often been the 'real' subject of cultural, religious, and political discourse that did not

> dare to mention it or did not have the language for addressing it directly. We now possess both the language and the cultural temerity to discuss sexuality as straightforwardly as we like and with a frankness that would have shocked people a few decades ago. (as cited in Allen, 2004, p. 120)

Social Construction of Sexuality/Identity

The literature above examines a brief chronological view of the definitions of sexuality and reflects the changing culture of the United States. According to Allen (2004), "the history of sexuality in the United States renders a fascinating example of the social construction of social identity as well as the enactment of power relations" (p. 120). Our contemporary ideas and views of sexuality are not what they were centuries or even decades ago. Matters of sexuality today are exploited by the media and raise more legal issues than ever as evidenced by the current debate over gay marriage.

Sexuality has become an openly identifying feature of who we are, and how we express our sexual identity, whether privately or publicly, and is to some an issue of social and political debate and concern. Perhaps the best way to represent this is to repeat Audre Lorde's 1970's political phrase, "the personal is the political." Dealing with the politics of sexuality during the fundamental times of feminism is also a time of confusion for women's sexuality. Naomi Wolf (1991) claims that during the "decade when women became political about womanhood and sexuality" culture deemed intimate sex as boring and too neutral

and stated, "if women are going to have sexual freedom.... they better learn how to fuck like men" (p. 134). Thus, political ideals of women, sexuality, and power present women with an identity struggle such that they had never before encountered. Identity can no longer be considered outside definitions of self. Identity and sexuality are both social phenomena and must be defined as an individuation of our culture through our personal experience.

The constructionist view is that we can only, "understand sexuality through the cultural meanings which construct it" (Weeks, 1993, p. 34). Weeks suggests that, historically, questions of sexuality and identity do not include the "true nature of identities, but identities' political relevance" (p. 34). According to one social constructionist, "cues from the human environment shape human beings from the moment they enter the world" thus the expectations, values, and customs of previous generations are passed on to a new generation and, "by example exert a powerful influence over individuals, (Schwartz & Rutter, 1998, p. 15).

In Western, North American culture, "sexual socialization is complex," (Schwartz & Rutter, 1998, p. 16) extends to the overriding mainstream culture, one's family culture, and individual attitudes and beliefs regarding sexuality are personally learned from various sources. These individual beliefs and values are uniquely incorporated and provide the basis on which we premise our sexual identity. Some scholars argue that there is no line between identity and sexuality;

in other words, we are defined by our sexuality (Allen, 2004; Villanueva, 1997). Villanueva (1997) declares sexuality as, "being a complex and individual phenomenon influenced by social norms, culture, and personal experience, thus it is socially constructed. All these affect the way individuals define, feel, and perceive their sexuality" (p. 2).

Sexuality is explained by Cline (2002) as a function of defining the self; as identity. Cline explicates this identity as twofold. First, sexuality functions to identify gender in the context of traditional gender stereotypes, specifically in regards to masculinity and male prowess and virility. Secondly, sexuality may signify adulthood or maturity, and in turn validate life itself (p. 6). Harvey and Weber (2002) describe sexuality as an identifying marker of self by stating, "Sexuality teaches us, more than any other human experience, about self-who am I and why do I exist?" (p. 55). They continue, "...sexuality is the source of some of our greatest fears and embarrassments. Whereas at the same time, it is the source of some of our greatest moments of ecstasy and hope..." (p. 55). The dichotomous nature of sexuality defining the self leads to confusion, academically and personally.

Allen (2004) discusses communication as an identifying feature of social groups. She says, "Communication comprises discourse and discursive practices that produce, interpret, and share meaning about social identity groups" (p. 190). Allen goes on to describe how we use communication to create and recreate our

identities as we interact with others, including relational partners. "Within any cultural communication system, erected upon cultural premises of the person and action and nature, there will be available a variety of social identities" (Carbaugh, 1996, p. 29) including sexual identity. Carbaugh posits this premise as an acknowledgement of the complexities of culture, communication, and identity in Western, North American culture, and continues by claiming that, "social identities are conceived or conversed as something inside the agent, something an individual has or has become; they are part of one's internal self" (p. 23).

Carbaugh (1996) goes on to establish that identities can be more than this and can be something, "people do on occasions, something invoked, used, interpreted with, displayed, performed, and so on in particular social scenes" (p. 23). Thus, identity is socially constructed in sexual situations and may lead to different identities than those carried out in everyday, mundane situations. Sexual identity, that is, is not necessarily consistent with other identities.

Eisenberg (2001) challenges the historical work that combines communication and identity because "most theories that seek to link communication to identity do so with an overly simplistic view of the communication process" (p. 539). He proposes a new theory of communication and identity that, "connects a person's communicative choices with their personal narratives, their personal narratives with their bodily experience of emotionality, and each of the above with the environmental resources available for the creation

and sustenance of particular identities" (p. 542). This particular theory is useful in thinking about sexuality and identity because it encompasses all aspects of the definitions of sexuality (emotion, desire, experience, freedom, and pleasure) as well as the individual as an agent of change.

Communicating about Sex within Relationships

> Sexuality cannot be treated in isolation: it cannot be understood [as] if it is separated from [...] such things as the relations between the sexes, the cultural ideals of 'love', or the institution of marriage. Sexual behavior is social behavior; it is not just the consummation of some biological drive. We cannot define anything as sexual in an absolute sense. (Jackson, 1996, p. 62)

Gergen (1994a) claims that the reality of relationships, "replaces the individual as the fundamental unit of social life" (p. 11). That is to say, relationships define and shape the world we live in and "constructions of the self require a supporting cast" (p. 208). With regard to sexuality and relationships, it is important to note that not all sexual intimacy occurs within the cultural norm of what is defined as a relationship. Sex may and does occur between strangers, as in the instance of a "one-night stand" as well as within committed, long-term partnerships. A sexually healthy relationship is based on shared values and has five characteristics: it is consensual, non-exploitative, honest, mutually pleasurable, and protected against unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted

diseases (STDs), including HIV/AIDS (SIECUS, 2001).

Weeks (1993) provides an explanation of the lack of sexual communication in a relationship by acknowledging a lack of common language with which to address it saying, "sexuality pervades the air we breathe, but we still lack a common language for speaking about it" (p. 1). As mentioned above, communication research focuses on the degree to which relational partners explore risk management communication within relationships. Weeks attempts to clarify the lack of language with which to communicate effectively both health and safety issues involved in sexual relationships and also the lack of a common language with which to describe the needs and desires accountable for our personal sexual satisfaction.

Josselson (1996) describes sexual desire as, "the most powerful of magnets that draw people to one another" (p. 74). We enter intimate relationships because of an attraction to another person. Intimacy and sexuality are integral to the foundation of a relationship and the attraction of the relational partner. An important aspect of and limitation to communicating about sexuality, particularly in the sense of desire and needs, is self-disclosure. We (traditionally) begin relationships by reducing uncertainty about the other (Wood, 2002, p. 147). Initially, we tend to not disclose as much as we do later in the relationship in the first stages, thus, communicating verbally about sex and sexuality early in the relationship rarely exists. Wood affirms that, "intimacy develops over time as a

result of communication between people" (p. 150). It is the dynamic of dialogue that produces intimacy and it is through interaction with our sexual partners that we "gain a self" (Michael, 1996, p. 14). Reis (1986) contends that "a relatively full sexual relationship involves two people's in-depth communication about their lives, their past loves, their understanding of sexuality, their hopes and fears as they pertain to sexuality" (as cited in Harvey & Weber, 2002, p. 56). Thus, communication constructs a relationship and in turn constructs the self.

Sex, itself, is a form of communication and an expression of our individual pleasure and satisfaction in that; "we gain a self only in and through a process of social interaction, dialogue, and conversation with others in our social world" (Sampson, 1993, p. 106). The interaction that comes within a sexual relationship is perhaps the most intimate and personal we will experience in our lifetime; therefore it is this relationship that serves as "knowledge of the self" (p. 106). Sex as a form of communication is a way of "saying or of showing something more tellingly than our words can say" and sexual actions "speak more pointedly than words" by nonverbally narrating our most intimate desires in a way that may not be comfortably listened to (Nozick, 1999, ¶ 9).

Chapter Two

Methodology and Methods of Research

The goal of this research is to better understand the lived experiences of contemporary women, their definitions of sexuality, their perceptions of identity, and their means of communicating during sexual experiences. It is my goal to better understand, and describe, these lived experiences; therefore a human science approach is crucial. The epistemology of constructionism (Crotty, 1998) is central to this research and as Ronai (1992) explains, "research is plagued with all the emotionality and uncertainty of any human behavior," (p. 123). This research is an attempt to understand the complexities of human life, behaviors, and actions specifically in sexual situations through my co-researchers' narratives as well as from my own life experiences.

Due to the highly personal nature of sexuality, research is often plagued with questions of how to go about studying this area without "undue intrusion into the lives of research participants" (Harvey & Weber, 2002, p. 58). Such intrusion suggests a lack of honesty and reality within sexuality research in social science. If sexuality defines the self then we, as communication researchers, need to attempt an exploration of lived experience to understand reality as women experience it within the ongoing sexual relationship and its specific encounters. To understand if and how women communicate in order to fulfill their intimate sexual desires and needs, we must understand how communication affects identity

in the sexual situation and beyond.

Cline (2002) explores the diverse meanings associated with sexuality from the participants' perspective. She expresses the need for a participant perspective in the study of sexuality to, "illustrate the problems created by ignoring participant reality" (p.1). Historically, social science methods have been used in researching sexuality, and most commonly, the survey has been used to gather data. Okami (2002) reviews the obvious problems with survey research when studying sensitive matter and the definitional factors that may hinder results and states, "we must find methods that function responsibly within our ethical and cultural restraints to obtain human sexuality data that complement survey data, or, in certain cases, perhaps improve on them," (p. 196). It is my belief that human science methodologies and methods, aligned with a constructionist epistemology, are imperative in sexuality research and fundamental to this particular project. Narrative methodology, data gathered through conversational interviews seems to have the promise of rich, thick data and a complementary form of analysis.

Approach

Constructionism by its very nature posits, "meaning is not discovered but constructed" (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). Therefore the "process of analyzing this research experience is important to understanding results, both anticipated and unanticipated" (Greaves, 2000, p. 32). Being the researcher and thus the research tool, my own definitions and experiences consciously affect the research

throughout this project. According to Denzin & Lincoln (2000) qualitative research is, "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world" (p. 3). Because social-construction is an ongoing, dynamic process, my own introspection affects all stages of this research. By the very nature of narrative interviewing, I am bringing my experiences and thus myself into the interview situations, thus requiring a careful observing of myself as the research tool and as co-researcher/participant (Crotty, 1998; Kvale, 1996).

Kvale (1996) asserts that "conversation is a basic mode of human interaction" and it is through these interactions that we "get to learn about their experiences, feelings, and hopes in the world they live in" (p. 3). Thus, conversational interviewing is fundamental to this endeavor in that I conducted "semi-structured life world interviews" to better understand my co-researchers and their sexual communication experiences (p. 5). Polkinghorne (1988) contends that narrative interviews require the "use of discourse" that "relates the units of understanding given by sentences into meaningful wholeness" (p. 31). It is this discourse between my co-researchers and myself that embodies the understanding inherent in lived experience and that incorporates the scientific rigor of communication research.

The design of this study anticipated a combination of conversational interviews followed immediately by the researcher creating transcriptions from the audio recorded interviews and research field notes. Follow-up conversations,

where necessary, included face-to-face and email interaction. Each of the co-researchers were collaborators and co-creators of the knowledge obtained through the various aspects of the design. It was imperative to allow them the opportunity to think more about the topic and respond with more detail later if they perceived the need, which most did. The area of sexuality and the communication that occurs within the intimate relationship is highly sensitive and personal in nature and most of the co-researchers reported that they left the interview still focused on the topic, yearning to think about it more and continued to do so well after the interview process had ended.

The selection of participants in this study was purposive due to the personal nature of sexuality and the questions I had raised regarding the communicative patterns of those women who are single as compared to those in committed relationships. I found that in discussing my research project with my friends and personal acquaintances, many were so interested that they volunteered to be co-researchers. It was only in retrospect of the interview process that I realized that their self-selection had narrowed my co-researchers to only heterosexual, Caucasian participants. Guidelines for participants included being a woman, over the age of 21, and currently or previously sexually active. Nine interviews were completed and included the following relational statuses: Three single women, three in long term committed relationships which I had defined as dating and/or living together for more than one year, and three women who are married. For

the purposes of this project only eight interviews were used after it came to my attention (after an interview) that one of my co-researchers "exaggerated the truth as to not seem so frigid" which she openly admitted two weeks after the interview; thus her stated experiences are not truthful and will not be included.

Each interview was audio taped and lasted approximately one to one and a half hours. The majority of the interviews were administered one-on-one; however after consideration, four of my co-researchers called upon me to continue their interviews simultaneously; thus, two pairs of two co-researchers were re-interviewed together after their initial interviews. Each interview was transcribed by myself one to four days after the interview to further my understanding of their experience and construction of reality as they live it.

All co-researchers were enlisted from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and the research adhered to all ethical guidelines set forth by the University. The research was approved by the University of Alaska Fairbanks Internal Review Board (see Appendix A). Each co-researcher signed a formal consent form and agreed with all terms set forth such as the possible risks and benefits and the voluntary nature of the research. Due to the very personal nature of this research I included three local numbers of counseling services should the participants become uncomfortable or should old experiences resurface that required professional counseling.

The Human Science approach to research is not complete until I

acknowledge myself as the research tool and thus, how my experiences and self significantly affect all stages of this research. Being a 28-year-old single woman I have natural, human ideas of what sexuality means to me and how I feel and communicate sexual needs. Realistically, my feminist reality of the current project affects my perceptions of this research. By admitting the personal struggles inherently possible I left the research open to the perceptions, ideas, and attitudes of my co-researchers until the analysis stage, when I contributed my own standpoint to the outcome of this endeavor.

Chapter Three

The Interview Experience

Each interview examined the lived experience of the women chosen to participate. Each narrative selected was an attempt to "stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). Being the researcher, I am "bound within a net of epistemological and ontological premises which become [...] partially self validating" (p. 19). This orientation set the stage for the questions raised and became the umbrella for each conversational interview.

Co-researchers all provided incredibly energetic, seemingly honest descriptions of their sexual experiences and their ideas of sexuality and relationships. Such narratives are the essence of communication and human science research. Each interview provided not only myself, but also the participant (self-admitting) with revelations regarding communication and sexuality. All interviews provided new perspectives of sexuality from the standpoints of my co-researchers through continuously extraordinary reflections into their beliefs regarding past, present, and future relationships, and how they believe they will change their communication within those relationships after the awareness gained through this project. During the interviews co-researchers saw "new meanings in what they experience and do" (Kvale, 1996, p. 189).

One of the biggest surprises of the interview process, that I had not previously considered, was the degree of self-disclosure that would be expected of me by my co-researchers. The relational level that existed between each of my co-researchers and myself before the interview did not provide me with an expectation of the open, honest, sharing nature that would surface within each interview. By self-disclosing my experiences, I induced my co-researchers to disclose more broadly about theirs, regardless of the difference or similarity of the experience. I also found most of the co-researchers looking for validation from me regarding their experiences, and I often felt that they wanted me to classify their experiences as "normal" or "something everyone has tried at least once." I found this need interesting in the fact that it proved to be crucial in the emergence of themes that became apparent when the interviews were completed and the final stage of analysis began.

Uncommitted

Ally's Interview

For the interview Ally showed up eager and ready to talk about sex. She is someone I see on a regular basis and relates that she has spent a considerable amount of time thinking about this project before the interview. Ally is in her second year of college, 21, single, and a "party girl" by her own admission. She exudes a contagious personality with boundless energy, and she expressed eagerness to participate in this study. Throughout the interview she constantly

laughed and joked about the "nature of scientific research today," suggesting she felt more like she was being interviewed by Playboy rather than by a graduate student.

Ally and I begin the interview with about 15 minutes of general conversation, which includes talking about sex, while I appraise her comfort level. We begin by discussing what sexuality means to her during which she defines sexuality as "self-expression of desire, emotion, and physical aspects of everyday life" and continues to explain how her sexuality plays a role in her day to day, mundane areas of life such as driving in her car, going to class, and working out at the gym. Through further discussion I discover that she greatly emphasizes appearance as an area of sexuality that "affects how we [women] wear clothes, put on make-up in the morning, and fix our hair." Ally speaks at length on how appearance, specifically the lack of "trying to look put together" is a sure way to know that a woman "isn't trying very hard" to expose her sexuality. Ally explicitly states an annoyance to, "those girls that pack on the make-up, wear the push up bras to the gym and giggle like they are 2 [years old] at boys. They annoy the hell out of me." She differentiates between appearance for the self and appearance for others by stating, " To me that isn't sexuality or sexy, just stupid and some girls cannot find the line between the two."

Societal standards of beauty seem heavily integrated into Ally's definition of sexuality and what being a sexual woman means to her. Ally states, "I mean if

I didn't think of myself as sexual I wouldn't bother to try to look the way I do. My mom taught me to always look my best since you never know who you will run into on any given day."

Her discussion reveals that her mother has played an influential role in how she perceives herself in regard to her appearance. She speaks of her mother very positively, describes how beautiful and "put together" her mother always looks, and how her mother expects the same from her daughters "at all times." The mother/daughter relationship is a matter of great pride to Ally who calls her mother her "role model" in life.

After discussing definitions of sexuality I steer the conversation toward sex, specifically to communicating about sex with partners. Being a young, single woman, Ally has had "over five" sexual partners in her lifetime and recalls a mix of emotions surrounding each, which she describes in intense detail. Beginning to talk about how she communicates during a sexual experience, she starts to open up about her past and her feelings about her present sexual relationships.

> I tell it how it is, I have to, to get what I want. You have to be open and honest for true fulfillment otherwise it is just a waste of time. I learned that pretty early on after too many unfulfilling experiences. If you don't speak up, especially if they are doing it wrong, you end up unsatisfied and who wants to waste their time like that?

Curious as to the experiences she calls "unfulfilling" I ask for further explanation:

> Well, I went out with this one guy about a year ago and he was super good looking but didn't have a freaking clue about my body. And it probably wasn't just my body because he was really bad. He didn't know where anything was so I tried to tell him and he looked at me like I was crazy. He totally ignored me and kept going until he was done. He didn't give a shit about me. I've been with a couple of guys like that and that is definitely all it takes. It seems like too many are out for themselves, selfish ass-holes. If I just wanted to fuck I'd do it myself.

The bitterness in her voice reflects a string of unfulfilling sexual experiences that she calls, "a waste of time." I ask her if she has regrets in regard to her past relationships and she blatantly tells me "no, I only learn from those mistakes and seem to make more, besides you never know what you're going to get with a guy in bed." Specifically Ally says she "has more success just saying it or showing them myself. We are all taught that men are visual creatures so sometimes I just take care of it myself, but supplement it by telling them why I'm taking over." She also discloses that being assertive in the bedroom has caused her to, "hurt a lot of feelings but, oh well, sometimes it's got to be all about me."

After discussing her "unfulfilling" experiences I ask her about the good ones, what made them good, and if communication was a factor. She taps her fingers on the table and says that they were good because they were not "selfish" and they enjoyed "going down on me without me even asking." She also admits

that she did not have to "tell them what to do as much because it was like they already knew." She continues to joke about how they knew what to do only because "someone must have taught them." Ally is very straightforward with her disdain of selfish men and how many of them she has encountered. Her "good" relationships are a direct result of "feeling comfortable enough to tell them what to do and they listen;" they also are more inclined to "make sure I cum first, or at all, comparatively speaking." She also claims a "love" for "one night stands" because there is a lack of "strings attached so you don't have to worry about what they think of you." She continues to explain that with "non-commitment fucking" she does not have to worry about "how I look naked, what size my tits are."

I ask Ally if she means that she is self-conscious in relationships and she says:

> Yeah, it seems like when I'm in a relationship I get so caught up in the baggage that it [sex] isn't fun anymore. I always have to worry about looking better than his other options and I am too young to care about that fucked up way of thinking.

Dharma's Interview

This interview was relatively short, compared to the others, lasting only about 45 minutes due to an appointment Dharma could not reschedule. She is one of the co-researchers I know the least; however, Dharma and I had previously discussed this topic on a personal level so she was aware of the research I was

conducting and the types of experiences I was looking to understand and discuss. Dharma is in her third year of college, 24 years old, and has been single for a year and a half. After some general conversation for about ten minutes we begin discussing sexuality and the meaning of being a contemporary woman. When asked what sexuality means to her as a contemporary woman she replies:

> I think it is a feeling of confidence about who I am, the way I look and my actions, like being able to express myself in a sexual way through expressions and appearance. I think it also means being able to express myself sexually with whomever I'm with.

Dharma is very adamant about the confidence she feels her sexuality exudes and the confidence it takes to "be a sexual woman without appearing trashy" by current standards.

> I mean without confidence, sex becomes kind of intimidating and for me, I feel more sexual when I feel confident and I feel more confident when I look pretty. Usually it is worth the extra time to get ready and look better than I do just on any given day.

She takes her appearance very seriously and volunteers that she consciously wears, "different clothes for different people." Upon further conversation she distinguishes between the types of clothing she deems appropriate for "the guy [she's] seeing" and those appropriate for an everyday look as in attending classes or shopping:

> If I'm trying to be impressive I might wear something more revealing than I normally would. Like on dates or at parties. I fix myself up more so I feel more confident and then I feel sexual. I know it sounds petty, but it really does help me.

The importance of appearance is clearly evident in Dharma's admissions of the connections between her sexuality, appearance, and attractiveness. As a bridge into communicating about sex we began discussing what she means by "I guess I just figured out that if you look really good you can get a lot more than if you don't take care of yourself." I question her as to whether or not this was meant to include or exclude sex to which she replied, " Well both. Obviously if you look good, or better than someone else, you'll get more guys interested if that is what you are looking for."

A surprising revelation from Dharma is her definition of a sexual relationship. When I ask her about her last sexual relationship she pauses for awhile and answers:

> I wouldn't call it a relationship, of traditional definition. More of a booty call which I still have sometimes. He is older and we became friends in class and went out a few times but slept together and still do.

It was at this point when she began to question me, seemingly looking for reciprocal recognition, about the normalcy of the "booty call" especially for young, single women. I continue the discussion of the "no strings attached,

freedom to just fuck" relationship, which she admits to having regularly, and ask her if she truly enjoys that type of sexuality. She unashamedly replies, "Who doesn't? He is just sort of a toy at the moment." She continues, explaining that between work and school, "I just don't want a full time relationship, this new guy is good for sex and it's ok for now."

Being very interested in this "just screwing around" relationship in Dharma's experience, we begin to discuss communicative practices. She says:

> I guess I think sex is more romantic without all the explicit talk. I don't really want a guy to be crude and nasty and say things like "fuck me" or like that episode of "Sex and the City" when Charlotte's boyfriend always called her a nasty bitch when he began to orgasm. I don't want that, that's weird. Maybe I've never really thought that talking during sex is necessary.

Given this response I query Dharma as to her seeming lack of communication in the bedroom, wondering if she means that she is merely lucky in getting what she wants from the men she has been with. She explains that rather than "talking about it [she] just lets it be whatever it's going to be." At this point she asks me if the fact that she has never actually had an orgasm with another person is "sad, pathetic, both?" We discuss the issue of non-fulfillment in the bedroom as a possible outcome of lack of communication. I ask if sex, then, is an attempt at intimacy and gaining the attention that only another naked body can provide.

Dharma pointedly responds: "I can take care of myself sexually and never really relied on a man for that but now that I think about it, yeah, I guess I should speak up."

Dharma, silent for a few minutes and staring at the ceiling, begins to find an explanation for her lack of communication, stating:

> I always feel a little embarrassed in the moment to say anything. Sometimes I have tried to show them by taking their hand and moving it or moving myself but never said anything out loud. It's embarrassing you know? How am I supposed to say that I don't even know what words I'd use? Real sex isn't like porn you know, where the women are always talking and being dirty. I could never be like that as much as I guess I should be right?

I became interested in her comparison of sexual communication with pornography and led the discussion toward cultural views of women in pornography and how they produce an "unrealistic" idea about how women are in bed. Dharma admits to watching porn alone but says she never lets her partners know out of fear she "will be judged" and/or labeled.

Marilyn's Interview

Marilyn is a 30-year-old woman who has been single for the past five years except for what she terms the occasional "fling." I begin the interview with Marilyn with random conversation to make the situation as comfortable for her as

possible. Marilyn is the co-researcher I know the least, so it was imperative that I create rapport and gain her trust. After about 30 minutes of conversation, she opens the topic about sexuality and communication by speaking of her "very best relationship ever." The relationship with the man with whom she says she frequently has sex, but no "real" relationship. In response to my curiosity as to how this evolved over many years, she declares that they have an "understanding that does not let emotion fuck it up" because "too many women think they have to have a man to be complete and that's just bullshit."

Marilyn states her strong opposition to the idea that a woman "should be married by a certain age" or "should have children" by pointing out that she herself has no intention of the "stereotypical family life created by society." A self-proclaimed feminist, Marilyn says she is quite happy with the course of her life and her decisions thus far. When asked about sexuality she uses a lot of reference to "self-esteem and self-confidence" and how the importance of sexuality lies in "femininity versus masculinity and the ability to be sexy in usually un-sexy places like the gym, library, or at home alone." When asked what "sexy" means to her she replies:

> Sexy is a state of mind, a feeling of knowing that you're being looked at. It's like one of those days when everything about how you look is right, your hair, make-up, the way your ass looks in your pants, one of those perfect days when you can go anywhere even if it's just to the gas station

and feel really psyched about yourself.

Marilyn did not distinguish between "sexuality" and "sexy" until I ask that question specifically. She thought about it for a bit and replied, "both are about self-confidence and femininity" and both are "highly important to be happy with who you are."

I then move the discussion toward her "un-relationship" with the man she has been and is currently with, as she phrases it, "just fucking" regularly. Interested in the quality of the sex, I ask her to explain to me the benefits of their arrangement and how pleasurable it is for her. Marilyn explains the benefits of having a sexual partner with whom she feels comfortable and with whom she can be herself without worrying about "being slutty or feeling awkward about asking for new things" such as "positions or bringing toys into the bedroom" that may be "weird for a partner with who you have to be on guard." She continues to talk about the comfort factor as imperative to having good sex, "why bother trying if you are always worried about how you look, or if he is having a good time; as long as you're comfortable then you are both having fun."

Marilyn moves the conversation toward communicating in bed about her needs and desires. She reiterates that, "if you are comfortable then you can ask for things that you know you need and really get them." However, with that said she has not always been comfortable with other people:

When I was younger and less experienced I just slept around thinking that

> the more sex I had the better it would get. I would just meet someone that knew what I wanted and how to do it. It wasn't until I was 25 that I figured it out for myself and it was then that I was able to say it 'out loud' to someone else; and I've been fucking him ever since.

We began to discuss the differences between verbal and nonverbal communication, especially in the bedroom, and she suggests that nonverbal communication such as "moving his hand to my clit" or placing his hand "on my breast," is much easier and seemingly "more acceptable" to herself, her partner, and her image of herself. The idea that the nonverbal is more acceptable in the bedroom is not a new concept within these interviews and in fact, most of my co-researchers agree with Marilyn when she states:

> If you tell a man to do something he automatically assumes he is doing it wrong, but if you show him using your own hand first he gets excited by the idea and is more willing to do it for you.

Committed

Carrie & Samantha

Carrie and Samantha opted to be interviewed together because of their equal willingness to share their stories and experiences not only with me, but also with each other. They also both felt that because they were already friends perhaps they could "learn something" from each other. This interview took place in a local bar over a few drinks and lunch, and lasted about an hour and a half.

Both Carrie and Samantha are students and both are involved in long term, committed relationships. I have a personal relationship with both, and both, as my friends, have a highly vested interest in this research. Both repeatedly expressed an unfaltering desire to review the final product and findings of this project.

As with the other interviews, we started with general conversation before beginning the discussion of sex and sexuality. Both co-researchers are aware of my work and research and both had very strong opinions on the cultural basis of attempting a definition of sexuality. Both Carrie and Samantha emphasized appearance in their individual views of sexuality. Samantha notes that she feels sexuality is, "both your own natural idea or personal idea and society's and I think you are working with a dual system. They play off of each other." The western society in which she grew up has socialized her, she says, to "think a certain way" regarding what sexuality means to her. That specific "way" she explains is, "masculinity and femininity; and I feel that what makes someone feminine is dictated in the media and what makes someone masculine or feminine are stereotypes." Carrie readily agrees with Samantha's perception of femininity and the "feminine quality" as an indicator of sexuality. Carrie begins a narrative about a recent experience, a conversation with her roommate in which the topic of discussion was how she exudes more femininity, such as "shaving my legs," she says, when her boyfriend is in town as compared to how she "doesn't even think

about it" when she is alone. She goes on to discuss society's views of what women are supposed to be and how that expectation is "part of our socialization and our society in general that we're supposed to be soft and all of these different qualities."

Samantha also reports that society has structured expectations of women and that those expectations have become habitual or "mindless" to her; such as wearing make-up:

> I wear make-up and just recently I've been wondering you know why do I wear make-up? I do it pretty mindlessly in the morning and it does, it makes me feel sexy to put on a little more eyeliner and to show that sexual side of yourself, and so in my opinion that's what makes me sexy is wearing makeup and I feel not so sexy when I'm not wearing any, and I don't mean to look down on other women who don't wear any makeup or fix their hair that they aren't feminine.

A noticeable interactive feature of both women's conversation is their way of making quick disclaimers, such as, "I don't mean to" and "I don't want to put anyone down" when discussing appearance and femininity. I question both of them as to why they repeatedly supply disclaimers. They both admit to "not wanting to talk bad about other women," although both report having very strong opinions about how women are "supposed" to look and how much "effort" should be put into personal appearance. Carrie explains by using a story, saying that

appearance is, "kind of a double edged sword" and continues by describing a girl in one of her classes who is:

> real thin, tan, hair always done, make up perfect and her clothes are all designer and she looks like she is obsessed with the way she looks and that isn't sexy to me, to look like it [appearance] consumes your life.

Samantha continues Carrie's train of thought by admitting that a woman can be sexy in casual attire, with added adornment such as "jewelry or lip gloss" and that is "enough" to make her "feminine." She then provides yet another disclaimer when she says, "it's sad that I'm saying this because it sounds like I'm saying that femininity isn't something that comes from within, that it has to be supplemented but this is the way we've been cultured." At this point in the conversation I begin asking both co-researchers how they communicate their sexuality nonverbally through their appearance. They both express the idea that appearance communicates confidence and that "confidence is what makes a woman sexual." Yet, Samantha indicates that nonverbal expression is an indicative factor of sexuality. "Gestures" she says "are a big thing and a woman could be completely makeup free and have the walk or the gestures and that would be sexual too. Sexuality is so intertwined in nonverbal." Carrie interjects, however, that nonverbal, communicative behavior is "sometimes misunderstood" and does not, for her, necessarily relate to sexuality.

Both Samantha and Carrie are currently in long distance relationships for a

short time and both report being sexually monogamous. They both openly admit to missing the sexual intimacy that comes from their relationships and as Carrie says, " you're not just going to go sleep around for sex just because your boyfriend is gone and you want sex." Both co-researchers say they place importance on fidelity and both acknowledge masturbation as a means of sexual gratification in the absence of their partners. Samantha explains that she is:

> feeling really sexual with myself and spending a lot of time with myself since he is miles away and now I light candles and sexuality [has become] romantic alone. Part of it is how I view my sexuality and how it describes my identity. I am definitely a sexual person.

Carrie talks of her identity in terms of sexual relationships and losing her virginity as a turning point in her "sexual identity." She relates that she was "20 and it was a major identity change when I lost [my virginity]. It wasn't like, oh my god I'm a different person, but it was an experience and I was [no longer] a virgin so what was my [new] label?" Samantha quickly agrees with Carrie and admits to being 20 when she lost her virginity as well. They both discuss the changing of identity from "girl to woman" when they had sex for the first time, and Carrie says that her "identity became confusing when I was no longer the virgin in the group" and how she still struggles with "finding myself and my sexuality."

The conversation turns to personal details at this point when we are interrupted but quickly turns to sexual acts as Carrie openly admits to having

"multiple orgasms with each sexual experience" and how her new self-identity is "multiple orgasm girl." She complains about how her friends inundate her with questions regarding sex. "They ask me everything about multiple orgasms [...] just because I do I'm supposed to be the expert. My personal opinion is that it's all about your partner how you feel about them; is it comfortable, the physicality." Both Samantha and I are very interested, at this point, in Carrie's ability to have multiple orgasms and begin to discuss the mechanics of sexual intercourse. We learn from Carrie that multiple orgasms are something she discovered alone before she had a partner.

Both co-researchers openly admit and discuss their passion for masturbation, and say they both began pleasuring themselves before having a sexual relationship. Samantha proffers her belief that, "you have to know yourself before you can tell anyone else what you want regardless of how you tell them." Carrie discloses that she knows what she needs, but has been fairly "lucky to find a man that enjoys going down on me and doing it well." She communicates what she wants from him simply by "moving his hand or changing positions." Carrie attributes this "luck" to being comfortable with her current partner "physically and emotionally."

Samantha discloses that in her current relationship, they discussed sex before actually having sex. She describes how she feels it is "necessary," especially if there are "fetishes or things others might find weird" about what one

of the partners likes and wants in the bedroom. Both Carrie and Samantha admit that discussing sexual preferences before having sex is important although not always possible. Carrie explains, "sometimes you're just in the moment and go with it hoping it will be good." Samantha agrees with Carrie in that, "sometimes it [orgasm] just doesn't happen and you have to fake it [orgasm]."

Legally Committed

Miranda & Charlotte's Interview

Miranda and Charlotte are very good friends with each other and requested to be interviewed together at a local restaurant where we could have dinner and margaritas. We met during the week, after work, had dinner and conversation before beginning the interview process. This particular interview was different from the others because both Miranda and Charlotte wanted to take the ideas discussed and ponder them for awhile. Both contacted me after the interview, via email, to give me more insight into their experiences. I have included parts of those emails within this description.

Charlotte is in her twenties, married for three and a half years and is in her second marriage. Miranda is in her thirties, married for five years, and has also been married twice. Both women are graduate students. Because they are both married, my main interest was the nature of their marital sexual relations and the issues of their comfort and communication in the bedroom. I begin the interview by asking each of them if the sex is better in their married relationship than sex

when they were single. Miranda responds, "No, not necessarily better, just more comfortable and more physical." Confused as to what she means by "more physical" I ask her to explain. She begins to talk about how each partner knows what the other likes and dislikes and how that kind of knowledge about the other's body comes from the "sanctity of marriage and the time together."

Charlotte is also very open about her perceptions of men and how she believes they like to hear sexual phrases such as, "fuck me" and "ride em cowboy" in the bedroom. Both she and Miranda discuss at length the notions of women being vocal in the bedroom stemming from, "society and how men are supposed to want it all the time and how women are supposed to be Martha Stewart and Pamela Anderson." The dichotomy between the cooking, laundry washing "goody two shoes" and the make-up clad, loud sexual huntress is a continuous thread of discussion between Miranda and Charlotte. They both talk, as married women, about how society supports stereotypes of "the wife" and how they perceive that men expect women to enact those stereotypical expectations at home. Both claim that this cultural stereotype is "false" and very "unrealistic."

Communicating about sexual needs and desires also seems to come more easily to Miranda and Charlotte although they openly admit to having been less than communicative in relationships before marriage. Miranda claims that, "if you don't know someone, you have to be more verbal than when you do just so they get it right." Nodding her head in agreement Charlotte discusses how in

marriage, "You just know each other better so it comes more easily than if you don't. I think when you are married the verbal stuff becomes more of 'hurry up' and 'I'm getting sore' than the sexy stuff."

Perhaps the most interesting and enlightening of Miranda's experiences came to me in the form of an email I received the day after our interview. She writes:

> It occurred to me that marital relationships turn high-context after awhile. You only have to tell him what you want if he's selfish, an idiot, or new to you. And I've had all three. To define sexuality in a nutshell, it's everything. I think it comes out in how you dress, speak, walk, laugh, etc. I'm not worried about attracting/deflecting men, and I'm not competing with women for male attention. Plus, I'm married and in a secure relationship. Your sexuality defines your personality don't you think?

Charlotte also sent me an email after the interview process with some new insight into marriage and communication. "Married people" she says:

> don't have to verbalize as much because we have been together and "done" one another long enough that we know what the other wants. That's in the bedroom. There have been a few times when we talked about something but it was generally brought up because of a TV show or something.

During this place in the email Charlotte writes of a game she and her husband

received as a wedding gift of "25 Naughty" sexual activities. She continues:

> My hubby and I have always prided ourselves on the fact that we don't need any help in the bedroom so we read them as a joke. Some of them were pretty raunchy and made us both blush. We didn't try any of them, but I will admit that at least we got some ideas from a few of them. Every once in awhile I get the [game] out and mean to read some but so far we haven't. That MADE us talk about things more, but not during the act. When you're married it's more about making love than about getting laid. I know that sounds pretty lame, but if you really love the other person it's like that. There have been times when I'll say his name in between moans or that I want to get in another position but in general I just make it happen. You might want to incorporate toys or books into this project because they definitely make people talk more about things [sex] that they probably wouldn't normally do.

Elle's Interview

My interview with Elle was perhaps the most enlightening in terms of defining sexuality and being open with information, which is central to human science research. She and I met for approximately one hour, but, given that we share a very personal relationship, we have discussed aspects of this topic numerous times, in less formal situations. She reports being happily married and makes reference to her husband in most of our conversation. She divulges that

she has had a "pretty promiscuous" past and yet had not come to fully enjoy "all the benefits of sex" until she met her husband.

Elle quickly differentiates sexuality and sex appeal. She claims that sex appeal is a sub-theme of sexuality and encompasses "youth, for example, accentuating your figure so people are looking at you, specifically men." She also credits the media with portraying images of what is or is not sexy for women at any given age. She is adamant about declaring sexuality as "powerful" and that "you always want to feel like you have sex appeal to both men and women." Along with being powerful, Elle defines sex appeal and sexuality in terms of appearance and being "physically healthy, looking physically healthy." She continues to define sexuality in terms of sex itself and how sexuality makes her think of, "kissing and all of the things you would do to get to sex. Both [sexuality and sex appeal] are communicative. Sexuality for me equals all the things that lead up to sex."

Along with being powerful Elle also discusses her belief that sexuality is about "inner strength [as a woman]" and that continuing to strive for sex appeal requires a lot of "personal strength. The older you get the harder it is because there are more excuses available."

Elle provides a detailed description of her sexual past and how she lacked the ability to communicate her needs to partners because what she was trying to find was what she had discovered at an early age, "in 5th grade, I realized the power/positive feeling of having sex, and how an orgasm by myself felt

amazing." Elle believes that her "self-discovery" and "personal enjoyment" was a "good start to exploring my sexuality." Elle admits to not having an orgasm with another person until she had had "3, maybe 4 [sexual] partners." I asked if her goal at that time was to have a successful orgasmic experience or if it was more about the attention. She declares that it was about "the attention" and that most of her unsatisfying experiences came because she had been drinking or was "worried about what people would think."

Elle suggests that her lack of communicating in previous relationships was due to a fear of being judged, stating she was too afraid to speak up because "culturally if we tell them [what we want sexually] we are [labeled] a 'ho'." She says this fear of being judged, stereotyped, or simply ridiculed prevented her from communicating needs and desires more forthrightly in her early relationships. Elle concedes that she rebelled against this cultural process when she:

> began feeling like it was ok for me [to have sex] and it was a double standard in society that I couldn't seek out sex for myself. It was then that a majority of my sexual partners took place when I was rebelling against a society that was telling me I wasn't supposed to seek it [sex] out. A good girl wasn't supposed to sleep around. Screw that! I had and have as much a right to seek it out as anyone else, especially as much as men.

Then I ask Elle if she thinks most women do not communicate about needs during sex, and if so, why not. She responds that from her own early experiences (when

she was not communicating her needs), she perceives that "part of that reason was my expectation that it was the responsibility of the men to decide our sexual experience." She continues to detail that she felt a lack of "control. I was naïve and thought it was all up to them because I did as much as they would of asked of me to do but they didn't ask [about my needs]."

Intrigued by her admission of lack of "control" I move the conversation toward the topics of sexuality and identity. Elle asserts that, "sexuality is communication on an intimate level with a spouse or whomever. Communicating what you want is the ability to use my sexual voice developed by my husband." She describes how her husband is the person who taught her to lose her inhibitions and to be "more experimental" including being communicative of her needs and desires during sex. She "thanks him immensely" for teaching her how to use her "sexual voice" to get what she needs physically and therefore emotionally. She proclaims orgasm as a communicative act of "sexual success" to the partner.

Interview Process to Final Analysis

Each of the conversational interviews included within this research provided an interesting, provocative look into the experiences of women. The interview process was and is a revealing look into the sexual nature of each co-researcher and their individual yet collective views of identity, sexuality, and communication. I found myself relating to my co-researchers as sexual women

and also relating to their experiences during each interview.

Chapter Four

Analysis

The conversational interviews conducted and presented above are co-constructions created with the co-researchers sharing our life experiences. They are "endlessly creative and interpretive" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), and I will now "make sense" of the experience emerging from the narratives of our stories by becoming a "conduit through which such voices can be heard" (p. 23). Through this final effort of analysis of the data I am interpreting "natural meaning units and explicating their main themes," (Kvale, 1996, p. 196). It is through this explication of themes that the meanings of the co-researcher stories are co-constructed through my own experience with them and with my own stories. Renata Tesch (1990) describes the final analysis stage of human science research in terms of the difficulty entailed in the work, claiming that the researcher must be, "informed and naïve, experienced and fresh, engaged and distanced, focused and open, pushy and patient" (p. 240) simultaneously throughout the final process of research.

Each conversational interview provides an introspective and integrative viewpoint from which to consider how contemporary women construct their sexual identities and communicate their sexual needs [or not] during intimate relationships. Each interview was a candid account of the co-researchers' sexual lives, both past and present, and each co-researcher related her lived experience so

that as human science communication researchers, we can more accurately understand these experiences as a construction of significant personal reality for these women.

Narrative methodology calls for the researcher to experience diligent, careful, and thorough immersion in the conversational interviews, both as audiotape and as transcriptions. Two main themes emerged from this final process regarding how these women communicate their sexuality, construct their sexual identity, and perceive their sexual roles as women. For my co-researchers *as* contemporary women, sexuality is the epitome of self-identity and is inextricable from self-presentation. Given the dialectic expressed between sexual freedom and puritanical sexual mores of the cultural tradition, there is a distressing reality that cultural "morality" and patriarchical politics still create an experiential tension between these women and their partners as a source of apprehension. They still feel socially judged in the privacy of the bedroom. All the co-researchers were forthcoming regarding their sexual experiences and how their sexual-identity permeates every aspect of their lives from self-identity to self-presentation in their relationships and in public.

Defining Sexuality as Self-Stereotyping Identity

From the beginning of this endeavor I explicitly chose not to use a specific definition of sexuality and decided, rather, to allow my co-researchers to express their own operational definitions based on their experiences and beliefs. An

interesting finding from this decision to allow each co-researcher to define sexuality in her own terms is the range of definitions and how these definitions varied in relation to the co-researcher's age. The language they use to describe sexuality and how their sexuality relates to their self-identity is also consistent. Elle, being the oldest of my co-researchers, stresses "power and inner strength" as her conceptualization of sexuality, parsing out "sex appeal as a matter of appearance not sexuality." Elle was the only participant who did not emphasize appearance as a self-indicating factor in perceiving her own sexuality. She recognizes her experience has allowed her to speak of her "sexual voice" and the sexual freedom it implies as a relational outcome of her marriage. There is no indication that Elle spends more introspective time on her sexuality than other co-researchers so one must recognize a temporal affect; more sexual experience seems to have resulted in Elle managing to distance herself from the dialectic between sexual oppression and sexual freedom that the co-researchers all report.

Commonalities between all co-researchers include language use. Words such as, "desire, confidence, gestures, masculinity and femininity" are common to all the interviews and used to define co-researchers' concepts of sexuality. Each co-researcher calls attention to the intricacies of the cultural standards of appearance. What a woman should look like is framed as a personal defining factor of each co-researcher's conception of self and sexuality. For example, most spoke explicitly about "make-up," "being looked at," "trying to look put

together," all because "if you look good, you can get more." The opportunity for sex, as a result of self-presentation, is revealed as a measure of personal success and as important to co-researchers' sexual identities. These "societal stereotypes" are a mundane aspect of everyday life for my co-researchers, and women continue to fight age-old, patriarchical socialization in order to gain respect, honor, and credibility (Wolf, 1991; Friday, 1996). Co-researchers choose to "reveal" or "hide behind" their appearance, in direct regard to the self-identity markers of their sexuality. Desirability as a factor in sexual identity reveals significant evidence of influence by commercial media. Conceptualizing the opportunity for sex as a result of women's successful self-presentation and impression management is the primary "storyline" of contemporary advertising. In at least a broad sense, co-researchers have "bought into" that storyline and incorporated it into their own concepts of sexual identity.

Friday posits, "Beauty's power is eternal, not something we can turn on and off" (p. 88). This philosophy is a testament to the historical notions of what is attractive is good and what is unattractive is bad, or as my co-researchers claim, "a shame because it seems like women who don't care about the way they look aren't really sexual at all," they "aren't trying hard enough." Naomi Wolf (1991) claims, as do many of my co-researchers in making disclaimers, that:

> Many [women] are ashamed to admit that such trivial concerns--to do with physical appearance--matter so much. But in spite of shame, guilt, and

> denial, more and more women are wondering if it isn't that they are entirely neurotic and alone but rather that something important is indeed at stake that has to do with the relationship between female liberation and female beauty" (p. 9).

Wolf (1991) goes on to explain that stereotypes of attractiveness are not about women at all, but about, "men's institutions and institutional power" (p. 13). It is this cultural double-bind omnipresently reinforced in commercial advertising for which the co-researchers address and make apologies. As Samantha says, "it's sad that I'm saying this because it sounds like I'm saying that femininity isn't something that comes from within, that it has to be supplemented but this is the way we've been cultured." Being "cultured," or being moved toward self-stereotyping in regard to their sexuality, is a primary theme found in this research.

"Self-stereotyping" physical appearance, for my co-researchers, is a "bottom line" factor in their perceptions of how others judge "personalities, sexuality, sex appeal, popularity, success, intelligence and often happiness." As seen through the experiences of the co-researchers, the self-stereotyping of sexuality in their self-presentation is a highly indicative factor of sexual identity as a social construct.

Each co-researcher associated sexuality and self by recognizing the impact of sexuality on her self-identity. Carrie explains that she had a problem with defining her identity after losing her virginity because she was no longer "the

virgin" within her social group and she recalls having struggled with how to "label" her identity. The impact of relational status and its influence on sexual identity is not shown here to be a conclusive indicator. While recognized by co-researchers, it does not seem to matter whether a woman is in a relationship or not. Sexual identity, to these contemporary women, is "everything;" it "defines your personality" and "who you are as a woman." Historically it appears that the freedom of a woman to be a sexual being, in terms of a contemporary social identity, is experienced as inextricably bound to a commercially mediated version of self-presentation and the imaging of impression management for sexual success.

Setting the Stage for Uncertainty as Mask

> Society's sexual oppression undermines itself by creating a permanently widening divergence between sexual tension and the outer opportunities of gratification as well as the inner capabilities for gratification. (Reich, 1972, p. 247)

Throughout the interviews and the narrative stories of the co-researchers, an acknowledgement of fear became apparent. When conversation regarding intimate communication, and the frequency and degree that occurs between sexual partners became topical, most co-researchers expressed that "yes, it is necessary" and "If you don't speak up, especially if they are doing it wrong, you end up unsatisfied and who wants to waste their time like that?" A consistency

was evident in contemporary experience that a woman's communicating about sex with a relational partner is crucial to "achieving orgasm" or "getting what you want" but most co-researchers report that when communication becomes necessary, it most often takes the form of nonverbal indicators of what they want from their sexual partners. They recount "moving his hand where I need it" or "changing positions" to heighten the pleasure.

Pursuing why nonverbal communication is preferred over verbally stating what they need, it became evident that an internal apprehension exists still for contemporary women in regard to what is "permissible" to women's' sexual role in relationships and how the line is uncertain between concepts of acceptable and aggressive. The fear of "being judged" or "labeled" for being "too experienced" was indicative of why the co-researchers do not vocalize what they want sexually. Dharma, for instance, admits to watching porn alone, but never letting her partners know, out of fear she "will be judged" and/or "labeled." Likewise Elle claims that, "culturally if we tell them [what we want sexually] we are [labeled] a 'ho'." Contemporary women, that is, are free to develop a public, sexual identity, yet in the contexts of intimacy co-researchers experience the double-bind of patriarchical expectations.

This distinct double bind exists, in the experience of my co-researchers, as they claim a need to tell their partners what they want, but also the trepidation that they will be deemed a "slut," "whore," "ho," "too easy," or "too experienced."

Guy & Banim (2000) attribute this double bind to the "structural positioning of women in a patriarchical, capitalist society that generates distorted self-perceptions and defensive and inauthentic presentation" (p. 313). The inauthentic presentation seems a crucial aspect of communicating sexual needs. These co-researchers do not want to be "labeled a slut" or "whore" for being too aggressive, yet simultaneously do not want to be submissive because it would only lead to "unfullfillment [sexually] so why bother?" Women are trapped in a sexual bind between being aggressive and deemed "a whore" or being submissive and sexually ungratified. Culturally we can be one or the other, but to be both feeds a fire of violated cultural expectations. Friday (1996) comments on the female, innate need to be seen as sexual yet the struggle that exists with being condemned for being "too sexual":

> Ambivalence explains so much of life. As in, I love you, I hate you. As in, how much to show, how much to let another see of one's needs, one's naked self. What bliss to show all and be adored; what agony to be judged, then abandoned after having revealed so much of one's self. Better to show nothing, but then, who would have seen us? (p. 1)

This quotation captures my co-researchers' confusion between openly communicating needs for personal pleasure and keeping quiet. The tension leads to a second primary theme of this research, or uncertainty as mask.

Co-researchers expressed the relational value of verbally acknowledging desire. Many say, "yeah, maybe I should speak up more;" yet for all there is reasoning for not speaking up, " I always feel a little embarrassed in the moment to say anything;" "It's embarrassing you know?" "How am I supposed to say that I don't even know what words I'd use?" For some there is clearly experience of choosing not to speak, "the time is never right" or "sometimes you're just in the moment and go with it hoping it will be good."

The idea that nonverbal communication is more acceptable in the bedroom than direct verbalization of desire is reported by my co-researchers. In fact, most of the co-researchers agree with Marilyn when she states:

> if you tell a man to do something he automatically assumes he is just doing it wrong but if you show him using your own hand first he gets excited by the idea and is more willing to do it for you.

The acceptability of nonverbal communication over verbal communication repeatedly surfaced in these interviews, with co-researchers stating that they "move his hand to my clit," or place his hand "on my breast," or "change positions," and that is much easier and seemingly "more acceptable." Co-researchers perceive the creation of "uncertainty" in the minds of their sexual partners by avoiding verbal communication of their sexual needs. The co-researchers prefer the safety of not being labeled and/or judged within their intimate relationships, and choose nonverbal communication as a means of

producing this "self perceived" uncertainty. The tension that exists between using verbal communication and being labeled and/or judged negatively or remaining sexually dissatisfied is a real, defining feature of the problematic area of sexual communication in the minds of co-researchers. The idea of verbally communicating desire was actually new to a few co-researchers who claim, "maybe I've never really thought that talking during sex is necessary" or instead of talking about it, "I just let it be whatever it's going to be."

Comfort with the space between verbally expressing sexual desire and the potential of negative labeling by a sexual partner is difficult for women in the transition toward sexual freedom. Samantha states, "sometimes it just doesn't happen and you have to fake it" in order to "not hurt his feelings, and that's ok sometimes." The potential for unsatisfying sex is evident in the stories of all co-researchers. The perceptions of men and how men like to hear sexual phrases such as, "fuck me" and "ride em cowboy" in the bedroom was directly stated by Miranda and Charlotte, both of whom are married. It is clear that men enjoy verbalization of sexual desire, but there remains a perception that such verbalization for women is still reserved for the sexuality of a long-term, committed relationship.

Marital sex still lacks verbal communication but is high in comfort and turns "high-context after awhile. You only have to tell him what you want if he's selfish, an idiot, or new to you, not your husband." Being comfortable in sexual

relationships seems to exist after a long time together and married couples do not need to verbalize as much because, "we have been together and 'done' one another long enough that we know what the other wants."

Prior to such long-term commitment, contemporary women actively cultivate a mask of uncertainty by either communicating nothing at the risk of their own dissatisfaction, or expressing their needs nonverbally. This mask of uncertainty disallows the labeling they fear and creates a level of comfort in which their sexual desire and sexual identities are protected.

Comfort is an important issue for contemporary women as well. "If you are comfortable," one says, "then you can ask for things that you know you need and really get them." Comfort was a common term expressed by the married co-researchers when describing the differences in communicating now, with their husbands, as opposed to their lack of communication with previous partners.

The women in this study enjoy and embrace their sexuality and in doing so, demonstrate the problematic nature of sexuality in the development of expression of their social and personal identities. Communicating about what they want sexually is an area into which they have gained insight through experience of contemporary sexual freedom. Yet there remains in their perception a tension between expressing desire and being judged and labeled in socially negative ways. In order to create an acceptable space for their sexual experience contemporary women rely on a masking device. Purposeful

uncertainty, as a theme of co-researcher experience, refers to manipulating the perception of sexual partners to move their evaluations of these women away from the negative social labels. This manipulation manages the need for sexual satisfaction and the requirement of acceptable social role. Almost literally it balances the achievement of orgasm without being labeled a "ho."

The theme of sexual self-stereotyping identifies how contemporary women themselves are manipulated. The social construction of identity is broadly understood in social and human science; however, when it is demonstrated directly in the experiential expression of these co-researchers that their sexual identities follow the storyline appeals of contemporary advertising we are left to wonder. Without value judging this fact as social and cultural development, it is evident that mediated culture is exactly the form of social control that Critical theorists claim.

This study suggests that further research is well warranted. A broader range of co-researchers (e.g., men, lesbians, and bi-sexual women) would perhaps result in findings that would mediate the present conclusions. Expanding the number of co-researchers, even remaining with the present research design and changing location (e.g., other regions) or specifically targeting different ethnicities might give a more balanced understanding of the nature of sexuality and sexual communication.

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Appendix

Informed Consent Form

The Social Construction of Self Identity in the Communication of Sexual Desire

IRB #04-06 Date Approved 2/4/2004

Description of the Study:

You are being asked to take part in a research study about how women create and or modify their identities based on sexual experience and communication. The goal of this study is to learn how women communicate to their partners their sexual needs and desires and how this affect the construction of their sexual identity. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you agree to be in the study.

If you decide to take part, you will be asked to arrange a convenient time for you to meet with myself for a conversational interview. The interview will take between one to two hours and will be audio taped. I will then transcribe our interview and may need to call upon you a few weeks later if I need clarification.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The risks to you if you take part in this study are possible discomfort due to the sensitive topic. Should you at any point begin to feel uncomfortable please do not hesitate to stop. You will not be penalized for refusal of continuation of the interview process. Should any past sexual or emotional discomforts arise I urge you to seek help from one of the agencies listed below:

Fairbanks Crisis Line: 452-HELP
UAF Center for Health and Counseling: 474-7043
Fairbanks Community Mental Health Center 452-1575

By participating in this study it is my goal to provide you with a better understanding of how you communicate about your sexual needs. By becoming aware of this you may leave this study feeling more confident we do not guarantee that you will benefit from taking part in this study.

Confidentiality:

All information collected is for the completion of my master's degree thesis project. Findings of this study will not be published or presented in any other forum other than my thesis without the expressed written permission of the participants.

- Any information obtained about you from the research including the audiotapes and the consent forms will be kept strictly confidential.
- Any information with your name attached will not be shared with anyone outside the research team, which consists of Dr. Jin Brown and myself.
- We will protect your confidentiality by coding your information with a pseudonym so no one can trace your answers to your name, properly disposing of computer sheets and other papers, limiting access to identifiable information, telling the research staff the importance of confidentiality, and storing research records in locked cabinets.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision to take part in the study is voluntary. You are free to choose not to take part in the study or to stop taking part at any time without any penalty to you.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions now, feel free to ask us. If you have questions later, you may contact:

Researcher: Kimberly Foore
Telephone: 458-8789
Email: fskaf@uaf.edu
Office: 503 Gruening Bldg., Department of Communication
University of Alaska Fairbanks

You may also contact the principal investigator and my faculty advisor:

Dr. Jin Brown, Department Head, Department of Communication
474-6591
ffjgb@uaf.edu
503 Gruening Bldg., Department of Communication
University of Alaska Fairbanks

Or the UAF Office of Research Integrity at:

474-7800
fyirb@uaf.edu
206 Eielson Bldg., Box 7560

Sincerely,

Kimberly Foore, Graduate Student
University of Alaska Fairbanks, Department of Communication

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, pleasecontact Karin Davidson in the Office of Research Integrity at 474-7800 (Fairbanks area) or 1-866-876-7800 (outside the Fairbanks area) or fyori@uaf.edu.

Statement of Consent:

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a copy of this form.

_____

Signature of Subject & Date

_____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent & Date